

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

# TREVOR NOAH

## BORN A CRIME

STORIES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDHOOD

BOOK  
CLUB KIT



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



## THEN

**Trevor Noah** was born to a white Swiss father and a black Xhosa mother at a time when such a union was punishable by five years in prison. Living proof of his parents' indiscretion, Trevor was kept mostly indoors for the earliest years of his life, bound by the extreme and often absurd measures his mother took to hide him from a government that could, at any moment, steal him away. Finally liberated by the end of South Africa's tyrannical white rule, Trevor and his mother set forth on a grand adventure, living openly and freely and embracing the opportunities won by a centuries-long struggle.

## NOW

**Trevor Noah** is the host of the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* on Comedy Central, which recently expanded from its original 30-minute format, producing social content, a digital series, podcasts, and more for its global audience. Noah joined *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* in 2014 as a contributor. In 2020, *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* received eight Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Variety Talk Series and Outstanding Writing for a Variety Series. Noah also received NAACP Image Award nominations for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series and Outstanding Host in a Talk or News/Information (Series or Special). *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* also received a NAACP Image Award nomination for Outstanding Talk Series. Noah is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Born a Crime*, which has sold more than one million copies, and has twice hosted the Grammy Awards. He tours all over the world and has performed in front of sold-out crowds at the Hammersmith Apollo in London, the Sydney Opera House in Australia, and in many U.S. cities.



<p>cry about your past.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p>dream of what you can imagine.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p>black people couldn’t or shouldn’t do.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p>the answer to, ‘What if . . .’ ‘If only . . .’”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>
<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“The triumph of democracy over apartheid is sometimes called the Bloodless Revolution. It is called that because very little white blood was spilled. Black blood ran in the streets.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“I couldn’t walk with my mother. . . . a light-skinned child with a black woman would raise too many questions.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“There was maybe one car for every thousand people. . . . Building the driveway was a way of willing the car to happen. The story of Soweto is the story of the driveways. It’s a hopeful place.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>

MEMORABLE LINES FROM *BORN A CRIME*

<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“‘Learn from your past and be better because of your past,’ [my mom] would say, ‘but don’t cry about your past.’”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“We tell people to follow their dreams, but you can only dream of what you can imagine.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“My mother took me places black people never went. She refused to be bound by ridiculous ideas of what black people couldn’t or shouldn’t do.”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>	<p><b>BORN A CRIME</b></p> <p>“Regret is the thing we should fear most. Failure is an answer. Rejection is an answer. Regret is an eternal question you will never have the answer to, ‘What if . . .’ ‘If only . . .’”</p> <p><b>TREVOR NOAH</b></p> <p>#bornacrime</p>
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# SOUTH AFRICA: A PARTIAL HISTORY

## THE PEOPLE OF SOUTH AFRICA

“Black South Africans outnumbered white South Africans nearly five to one, yet we were divided into different tribes with different languages. . . . Long before apartheid existed these tribal factions clashed and warred with one another. Then white rule used that animosity to divide and conquer.”

. . . the starkest of these divisions was between South Africa’s two dominant groups, the Zulu and the Xhosa. The Zulu man is known as the warrior. He is proud. He puts his head down and fights. When the colonial armies invaded, the Zulu charged into battle with nothing but spears and shields against men with guns. The Zulu were slaughtered by the thousands, but they never stopped fighting. The Xhosa, on the other hand, pride themselves on being the thinkers. My mother is Xhosa. Nelson Mandela was Xhosa. The Xhosa waged a long war against the white man as well, but after experiencing the futility of battle against a better-armed foe, many Xhosa chiefs took a more nimble approach. . . . ‘Instead of being resistant to English, let’s learn English. We’ll understand what the white man is saying, and we can force him to negotiate with us.’

The Zulu went to war with the white man. The Xhosa played chess with the white man.”

## WHAT WAS APARTHEID?

“Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control. A full compendium of those laws would run more than three thousand pages and weigh approximately ten pounds, but the general thrust of it should be easy enough for any American to understand. In America you had the forced removal of the native onto reservations coupled with slavery followed by segregation. Imagine all three of those things happening to the same group of people at the same time. That was apartheid.”\*



**South Africa**



# TIMELINE

**1652**

The Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony, Kaapstad, later known as Cape Town, a rest stop for ships traveling between Europe and India. To impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives, ultimately developing a set of laws to subjugate and enslave them.”

Shaka Zulu founded and expanded the Zulu empire, creating a formidable fighting force. In 1818, Shaka became king of the Zulus.

**1816 to  
1826**

**1830s**

“When the British took over the Cape Colony, the descendants of the original Dutch settlers trekked inland and developed their own language, culture, and customs, eventually becoming their own people, the Afrikaners—the white tribe of Africa.” [pg. 19]\*

“The British abolished slavery in name but kept it in practice.”

**1834**

They did so because, in the . . .

**mid-  
1800s**

“... in what had been written off as a near-worthless way station on the route to the Far East, a few lucky capitalists stumbled upon the richest gold and diamond reserves in the world, and an endless supply of expendable bodies was needed to go in the ground and get it all out.” [pg. 19]\*

“To work the colonists’ farms, slaves were soon imported from different corners of the Dutch empire, from West Africa, Madagascar, and the East Indies.” [pg. 115]\*

**1860s**

**Jan. 8,  
1912**

The founding of the South African Native National Congress, aiming to bring all Africans together as one people and defend their rights and freedoms. The organization renamed the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923.

**The Immorality Act is enacted.**

**1927**

## **IMMORALITY ACT, 1927**

**To prohibit illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives and other acts in relation thereto.**

**B**E IT ENACTED by the King's Most Excellent Majesty, the Senate and the House of Assembly of the Union of South Africa, as follows:—

1. Any European male who has illicit carnal intercourse with a native female, and any native male who has illicit carnal intercourse with a European female . . . shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding five years.
2. Any native female who permits any European male to have illicit carnal intercourse with her and any European female who permits any native male to have illicit carnal intercourse with her shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment for a period not exceeding four years. . . .

**1930s**

"To maintain power in the face of the country's rising and restless black majority, the [Afrikaner] government realized they needed a newer and more robust set of tools. They set up a formal commission to go out and study institutionalized racism all over the world. They went to Australia. They went to the Netherlands. They went to America. They saw what worked, what didn't. Then they came back and published a report, and the government used that knowledge to build the most advanced system of racial oppression known to man." [pg. 19]



1948

The National Party (NP), consisting of Dutch Afrikaners and many English-speaking whites, come to power and **apartheid is officially made into law.**

“The legal definition of a white person under apartheid was ‘one who in appearance is obviously a white person who is generally not accepted as a coloured person; or is generally accepted as a white person and is not in appearance obviously a white person.’ It was completely arbitrary, in other words. [pg. 119]

1950

**The NP started to classify South Africans on the basis of race.**

“Based on those classifications, millions of people were uprooted and relocated. Indian areas were segregated from colored areas, which were segregated from black areas—all of them segregated from white areas and separated from one another by buffer zones of empty land.” [pg. 22]

That same year the Immorality Act was amended to apply to sex between a white person and any non-white person.

“During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race.” [pg. 21]

1952

The Pass Laws Act enacted. “To leave the township for work in the city, or for any other reason, you had to carry a pass with your ID number; otherwise you could be arrested. There was also a curfew: After a certain hour, blacks had to be back home in the township or risk arrest. My mother didn’t care.” [pg. 24]

Each year, over 250,000 people were arrested for technical offenses under the Pass Laws.

Jun. 26,  
1952

The ANC launched the Defiance Campaign on a date that became the annual National Day of Protest and Mourning. Calls for massive acts of civil disobedience. Pass books were burned, signs for “whites-only” areas were ignored, and bus boycotts enacted.

**Separate Development added to the apartheid policy.**

Black South Africans were separated along tribal lines and consigned to ten designated homelands, referred to as Bantustans.

“The homelands were, ostensibly, the original homes of South Africa’s tribes; sovereign and semi-sovereign ‘nations’ where black people would be ‘free.’ Of course, this was a lie. For starters, despite the fact that black people made up over 80 percent of South Africa’s population, the territory allocated for the homelands was about 13 percent of the country’s land. There was no running water, no electricity. People lived in huts.” [pg. 64]

1958

**1963**

**Nelson Mandela imprisoned;** international pressure against the NP government intensifies.

The start of the Soweto uprising, a series of demonstrations and protests led by black school children that ended with a horrific massacre at the hands of an armed police force.

**Jun. 16, 1976**

**1978**

P. W. Botha became prime minister. The apartheid years under his leadership were by far the most brutal. Thousands tortured and killed.

“The South African government began making minor reforms in an attempt to quell international protest over the atrocities and human rights abuses of apartheid. Among those reforms was the token hiring of black workers in low-level white-collar jobs. Like typists. Through an employment agency [my mother] got a job as a secretary at ICI, a multinational pharmaceutical company in Braamfontein, a suburb of Johannesburg.” [pg. 23]

**early 1980s**

**1980s**

Township Uprising, the longest and most widespread period of black resistance to white rule. The government declared a state of emergency.



**Trevor Noah is born a crime.**

**Feb. 20, 1984**

**1989**

Botha pressured to step down as leader of NP, and Botha's preferred successor defeated by F. W. de Klerk.

F. W. de Klerk addressed parliament, introducing sweeping reforms.

**Nelson Mandela is freed later that year after 27 years in prison.**

"I was five years old, nearly six, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. I remember seeing it on TV and everyone being happy. I didn't know why we were happy, just that we were. I was aware of the fact that there was a thing called apartheid and it was ending and that was a big deal, but I didn't understand the intricacies of it." [pp. 11-12]

**Feb. 2, 1990**

**1990 to 1993**

**The apartheid system came to an end.**

"As the apartheid regime fell, we knew that the black man was now going to rule. The question was, which black man? Spates of violence broke out between the Inkatha Freedom Party and the ANC, the African National Congress, as they jockeyed for power. The political dynamic between these two groups was very complicated, but the simplest way to understand it is as a proxy war between Zulu and Xhosa. The Inkatha was predominantly Zulu, very militant and very nationalistic. The ANC was a broad coalition encompassing many different tribes, but its leaders at the time were primarily Xhosa. Instead of uniting for peace they turned on one another, committing acts of unbelievable savagery." [pg. 12]

**General elections held; the ANC won a sweeping victory.**

"Once Mandela was elected we could finally live freely. Exiles started to return. I met my first one when I was around seventeen. He told me his story, and I was like, "Wait, *what?* You mean we could have *left?* That was an *option?*" [pp. 30-31]

**1994**

# TREVOR NOAH'S FAMILY TREE

## GRANDPARENTS

### Great-grandmother Koko

"She lived with us as well. . . . She was super old, well into her nineties, stooped and frail, completely blind. . . . She'd sit in the kitchen next to the coal stove, bundled up in long skirts and head scarves. . . . fantastic and fully with it . . . like a brain with a mouth."

### Grandmother Frances Noah, the family matriarch

"She ran the house. . . . calm, calculating, with a mind as sharp as anything. If you need to know anything in the family history, going back to the 1930s, she can tell you what day it happened, where it happened and why it happened. She remembers it all."

### Grandfather Temperance Noah, the only semi-regular male figure in Trevor Noah's upbringing

"His name . . . was odd since he was not a man of moderation at all. He was boisterous and loud. His nickname in the neighborhood was 'Tat Shisha,' which translates loosely to 'the smokin' hot grandpa.'"



## PARENTS

### Mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah 'She Who Gives Back'

"Wild and free . . . She insisted on walking to the village, going where the men hung out. . . . My mother took me places black people never went. She refused to be bound by ridiculous ideas of what black people couldn't or shouldn't do."

### Father, Robert

"White. . . . a tall, brown-haired, brown-eyed Swiss/German expat . . . quiet and reserved. . . . before I was born, he opened one of the first integrated restaurants in Johannesburg, a steakhouse. . . . My father was loving and devoted, but I could only see him when and where apartheid allowed."

### Stepfather Abel

"If there was any doubt about Abel, the truth was right there in front of us all along, in his name. He was Abel, the good brother, the good son, a name straight out of the Bible. . . . But Abel was his English name. His Tsonga name was Ngisaveni. It means 'Be afraid.'"





## EXTENDED FAMILY

### **Andrew & Isaac, Trevor's Two Half-brothers**

“[Andrew] I only vaguely remember my mom being gone for a few days, and when she got back there was now this thing in the house that cried and shat and got fed. . . . [Isaac] She called him [that] because in the Bible Sarah gets pregnant when she's like a hundred years old and she's not supposed to be having children and that's what she names her son.”

### **Velile, the Uncle and Unplanned Pregnancy**

“‘He Who Popped Out of Nowhere.’ And that's all he's done his whole life, disappear and reappear. He'll go off on a drinking binge and then pop back up out of nowhere a week later. . . . he spent most of his time at the local tavern getting into fights.”

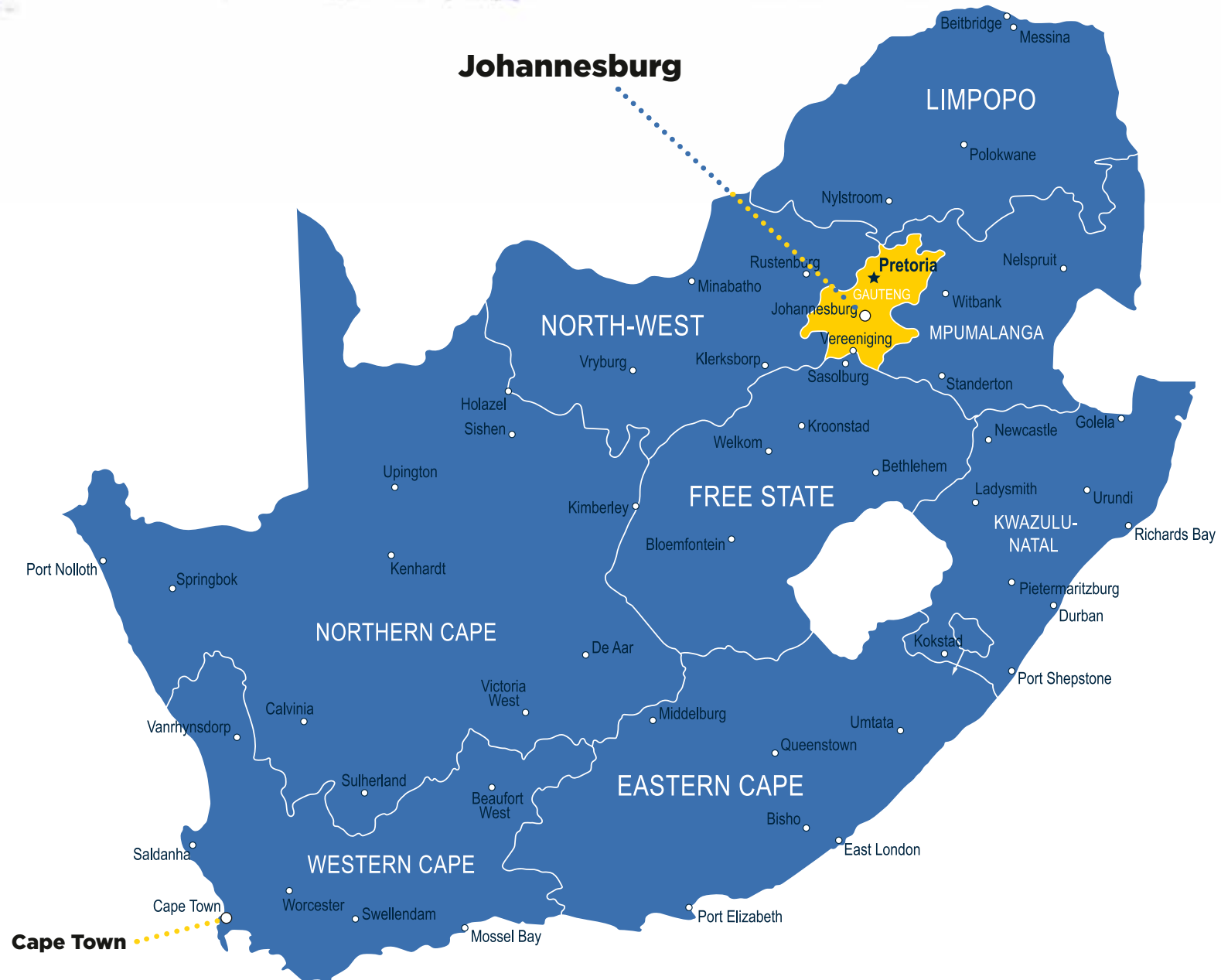
### **Aunt Sibongile & Uncle Dinky**

“In addition to my mom there was my aunt [and] her first husband . . . Sibongile was a powerhouse, a strong woman in every sense, big-chested, the mother hen. Dinky, as his name implies, was dinky. He was a small man. . . . tried to be abusive, but he wasn't very good at it.”

### **Mlungisi and Bulelwa, the Cousins**

“[Sibongile and Dinky] had two kids . . . Mlungisi. ‘The Fixer.’ That's who he is. Whenever I got into trouble he was the one trying to help me fix it. He was always the good kid, doing chores, helping around the house. . . . Both of my cousins were supergood kids.”

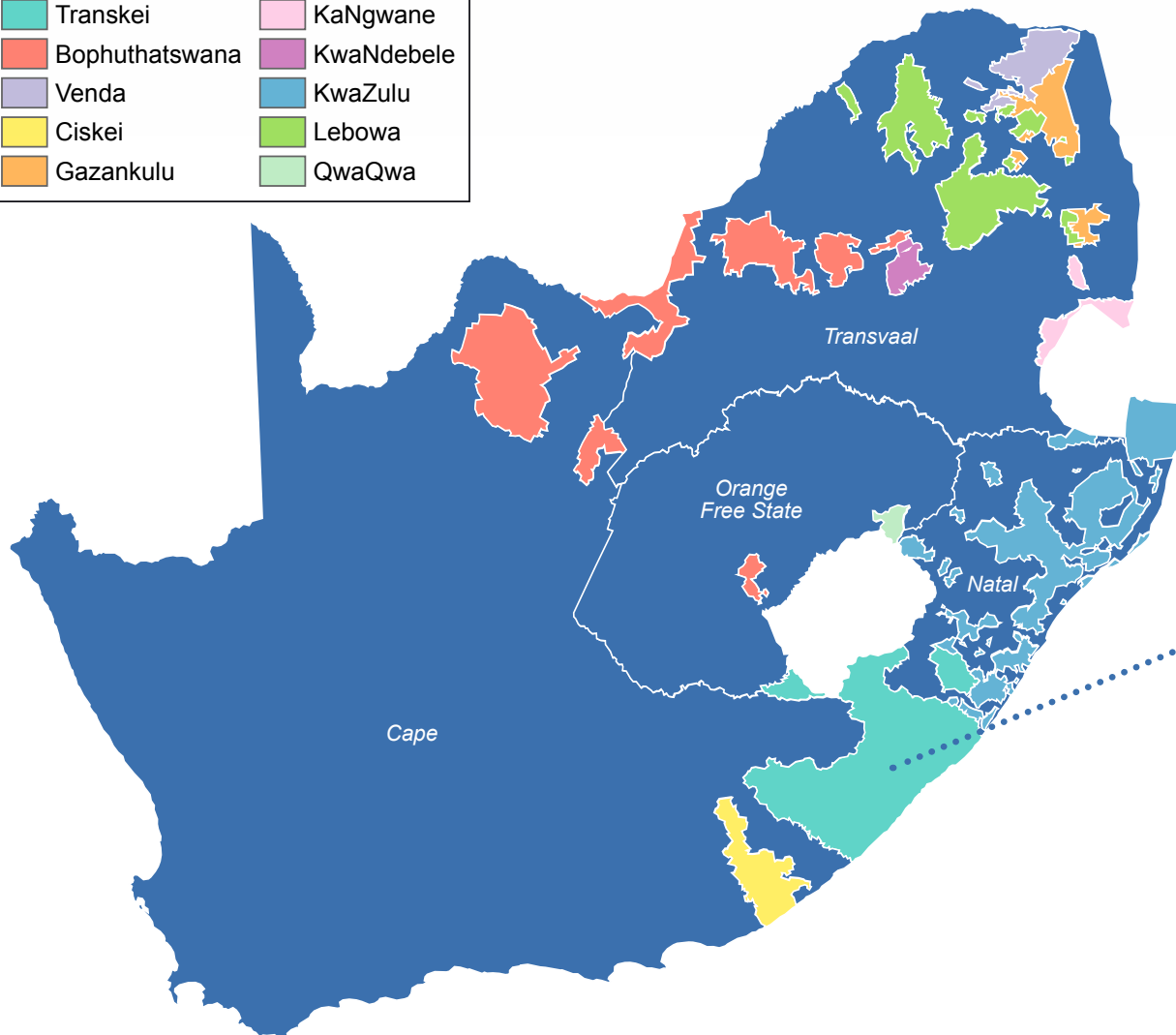
# SOUTH AFRICA





# BANTUSTANS

Transkei	KaNdwane
Bophuthatswana	KwaNdebele
Venda	KwaZulu
Ciskei	Lebowa
Gazankulu	QwaQwa

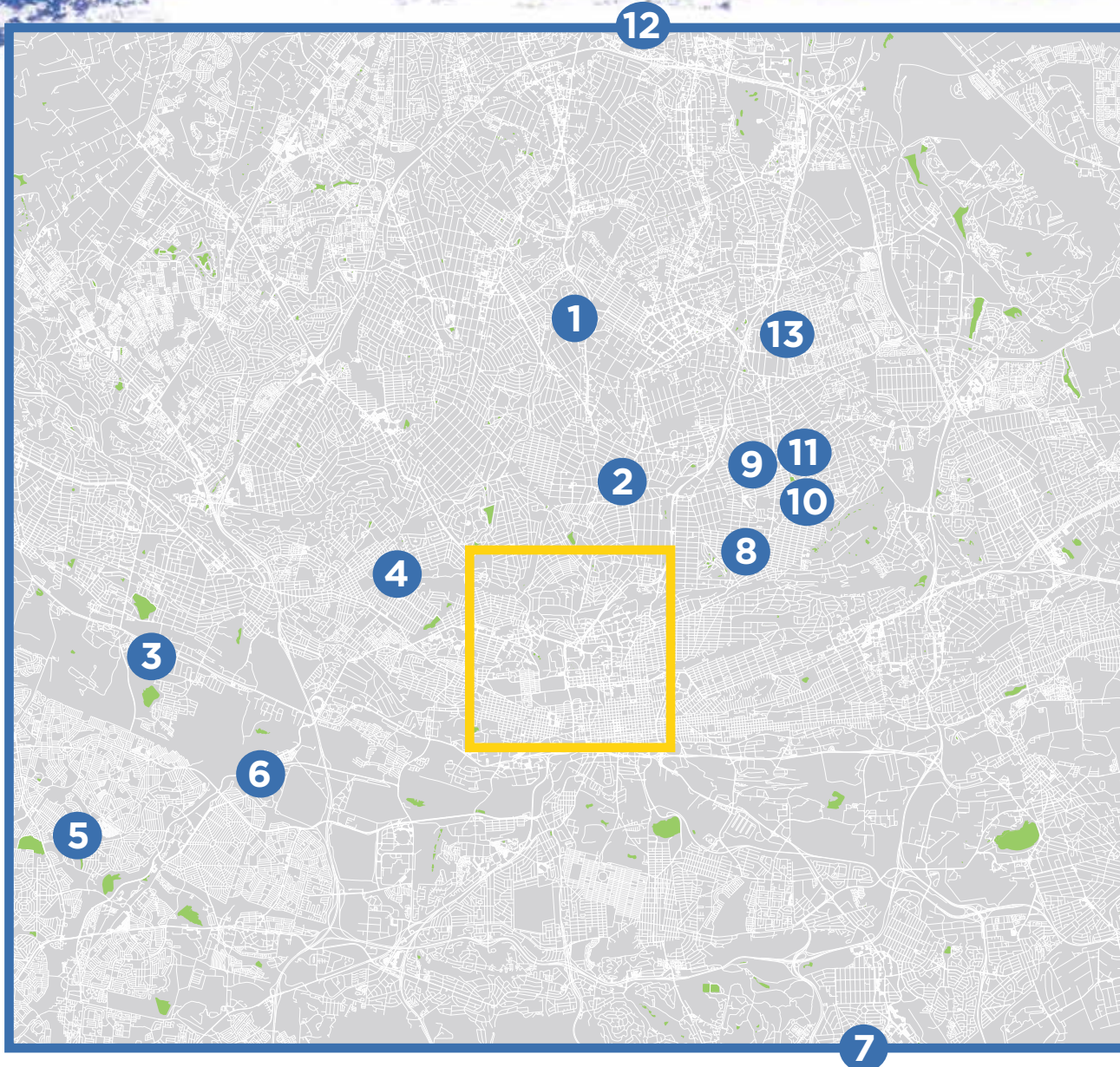


## PLACES DISCUSSED:

Apartheid-era segregation, forcing blacks to move to **Bantustans**, semi-sovereign black territories.

While growing up, Trevor's mom lived in **Transkei**.

# TREVOR'S JOHANNESBURG

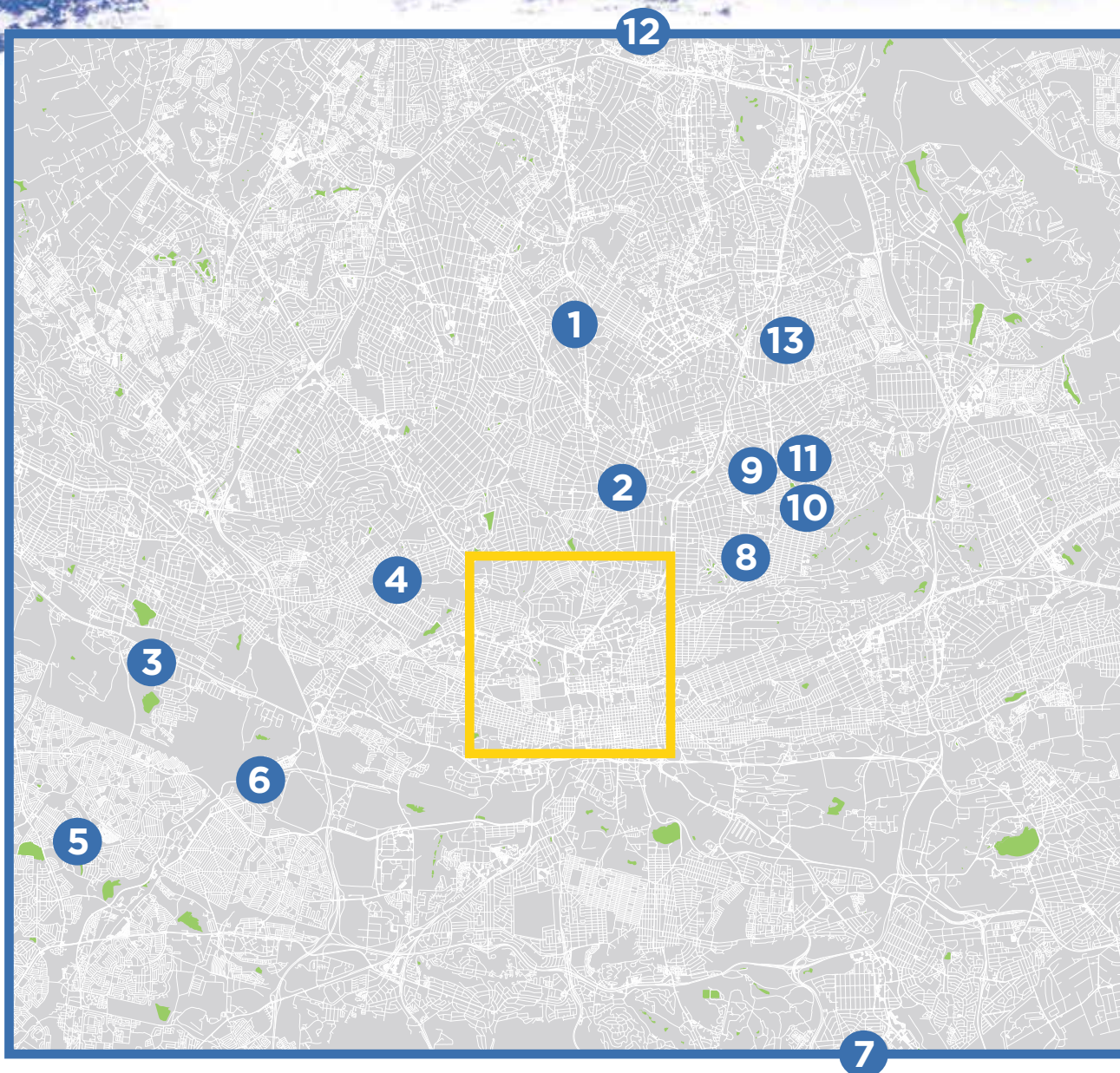


this selection is explored on page 16

## PLACES DISCUSSED:

- 1 **Rosebank Union is in Sandton, SA:** this is the White Church Trevor and his mom attend
- 2 **Jellicoe Avenue & Oxford Road,** where Trevor and his mom catch the minibus in the beginning of the book
- 3 Trevor's maternal grandfather, Temperance Noah lived with his second family in **Meadowlands**
- 4 Trevor's maternal grandparents marry in **Sophiatown**
- 5 They are then forced by the apartheid government to relocate to **Soweto**, a neighborhood in the Meadowlands
- 6 Once they divorced, Trevor's maternal grandmother moved to **Orlando**
- 7 Trevor's Mom got an apartment in **Eden Park (off map)**

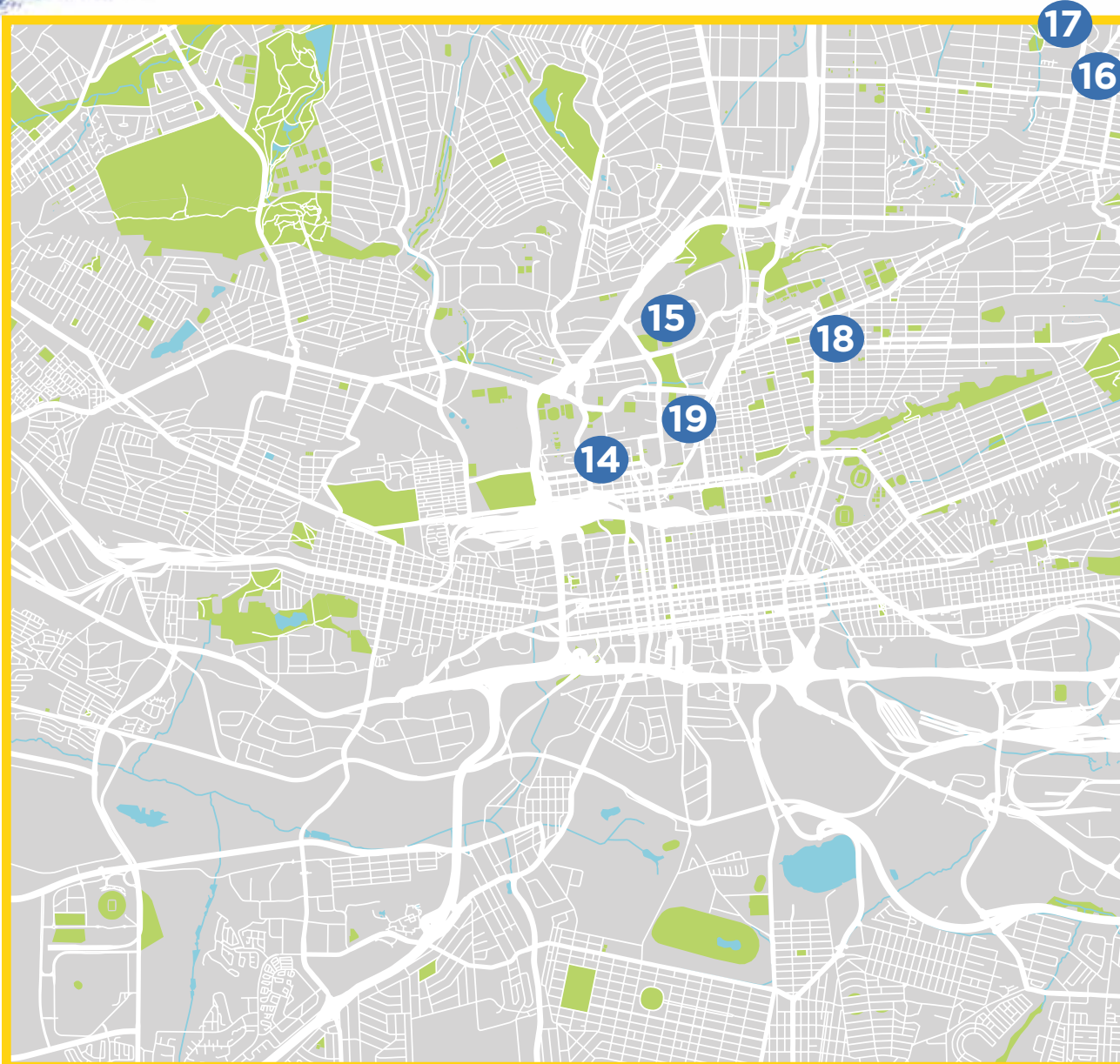




- 8 Abel, the man who would become Trevor's step-father, lives in the garage of a white family, which Trevor burns down, in **Orange Grove**
- 9 Trevor, his mother, Abel, and baby Andrew move from Eden Park to **Highlands North**, close to where Maylene lives
- 10 Trevor starts a new school, eighth grade at Sandringham High School, a Model C school, which meant it was a mix of government and private (like a Charter school) in **Sandringham**
- 11 Trevor and his friend Teddy shoplift at **The Balfour Park Shopping Mall**
- 12 Trevor's middleman for his CD-burning business, Tom go to **Hammanskraal (off map)** to the talent show
- 13 Trevor's friend Bongani lives in **Alex** ("the hood") and he goes to visit

this selection is explored on page 16

# TREVOR'S JOHANNESBURG, CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT (CBD)



- 14 Trevor's Mom worked at ICI, a multinational pharmaceutical company in **Braamfontein**
- 15 Trevor's Mom's secret flat was in downtown Johannesburg, in a neighborhood called **Hillbrow**
- 16 Trevor's attends Maryvale College, Catholic School in **Maryvale, SA** until the sixth grade
- 17 Trevor attends H.A. Jack Primary, a government school in **Highlands North**
- 18 After apartheid falls, Trevor's Dad moves from Hillbrow to **Yeoville**
- 19 Trevor gets pulled over by the police and arrested; brought to the **Hillbrow police station** for questioning



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What brought you to Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*?** What were your favorite parts of the memoir—the voice, the story, the characters—and why?
2. **“The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other.”** How much did you know about South African apartheid before reading *Born a Crime*? What shocked you most about this racist system of control? Do you see parallels of this divisive “divide and conquer” strategy in other countries, either now or in the past? Explain.
3. **“My relationship with my mom was like the relationship between a cop and a criminal in the movies—the relentless detective and the devious mastermind she’s determined to catch.”** Noah’s bond with his mother is prominent throughout *Born a Crime*. What was the strongest part of their mother-son connection for you?
4. **“My mom was wild and impulsive. My father was reserved and rational. She was fire, he was ice. They were opposites that attracted, and I am a mix of them both.”** Describe your parents. Do you think you’re a mix of them both—or are you more like one than the other? Explain.
5. **Noah writes, “I grew up in a world run by women.”** How do you think Noah’s upbringing was influenced by the generations of women in his life?
6. **Noah shares many funny stories in *Born a Crime*—the demon turd, the friend named Hitler.** Which were your favorite ones and why?
7. **Despite his primary school teacher’s recommendation that he remain in the advanced, white-dominated classes,** Noah opts to take lower-level classes with black students instead. He writes, “With the black kids, I wasn’t constantly trying to be. With the black kids, I just was.” What does this suggest about identity and belonging, especially considering Noah’s interracial identity?
8. **“Since I belonged to no group I learned to move seamlessly between groups.”** Noah writes, “I floated. I was a chameleon, still, a cultural chameleon. I learned how to blend.” Where in your life have you felt the need to fit in, to blend in, and how did you achieve it? What are the benefits of being a chameleon, and what are the costs?

**9. Growing up, Noah read voraciously.** “My books were my prized possessions.” What were your favorite books growing up, and why?

**10. Noah writes movingly about regret.** “We spend so much time being afraid of failure, afraid of rejection. But regret is the thing we should fear most. Failure is an answer. Rejection is an answer. Regret is an eternal question you will never have an answer to. ‘What if . . . ‘If only . . . ‘I wonder what would have . . .’” How do you feel when you read these words? Do you have any regrets?

**11. Noah remembers his first kiss under the golden arches of McDonalds.** If you’re comfortable sharing, where was your first kiss and what was it like? Romantic, rushed, meh?

**12. Noah discusses his participation in the underground economy of Alexandra, from pirating music to selling CDs and DJing parties.** He writes: “The hood made me realize that crime succeeds because crime does the one thing the government doesn’t do: crime cares. Crime is grassroots. Crime looks for the young kids who need support and a lifting hand. Crime offers internship programs and summer jobs and opportunities for advancement. Crime gets involved in the community. Crime doesn’t discriminate.” What do you think

of Noah’s assessment of crime? If the government plays a role in punishing crime, what role should the government play in its prevention?

**13. On how history is taught, Noah writes:** “In Germany, no child finishes high school without learning about the Holocaust. Not just the facts of it but the how and the why and the gravity of it—what it means. . . . In South Africa, the atrocities of apartheid have never been taught that way. . . . We were taught history the way it’s taught in America. In America, the history of racism is taught like this: ‘There was slavery and then there was Jim Crow and then there was Martin Luther King Jr. and now it’s done.’ It was the same for us. ‘Apartheid was bad. Nelson Mandela was freed. Let’s move on.’” What happens to a people who don’t learn their history, the context of events, and what are the ramifications for future generations? How can reckonings be made?

**14. After reading *Born a Crime*, where do you think Noah’s comedic talent comes from?** And how did comedy help Noah growing up?



# MORE ON TREVOR



## YOU THINK YOU NOAH TREVOR?

### Facts about Trevor Noah

- **NPR:** [An interview with Trevor Noah from 2016](#)
- **TED Talk** [“The Daily Show’s secret to creativity”](#)
- **NYT article from 2016:** [“Let’s Not Be Divided. Divided People Are Easier to Rule.”](#) by Trevor Noah, *The New York Times*, 2016
- **A *Politics & Prose*-sponsored interview** he did with Cory Booker: [Trevor Noah, \*Born A Crime\* discussion with Cory Booker](#)
- He speaks eight languages: English, Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, Southern Tsongo, Tswana, Tsongo, and conversational German.
- He’s part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, making a cameo in *Black Panther* as the voice of the A.I. system known as Griot.
- In 2020, during the pandemic, Noah paid furloughed crew members from his own earnings while he continued to broadcast from his home.
- At age 18, Trevor Noah appeared in the South African soap opera, *Isidingo*. He played a teenager at a party. The role was so minor, he didn’t receive a credit.
- He got his big break in America on *The Tonight Show* in 2012. Jay Leno invited him to perform.
- He has two stand-up specials on Netflix—*Trevor Noah: Afraid of the Dark* and *Trevor Noah: Son of Patricia*.